

**WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:**

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1. A method of providing payment services in a four-corner model, the four-corner model comprising a plurality of entities including a root entity, a first participant, a second participant, a first customer, and a second customer, the first customer being a customer of the first participant, the second customer being a customer of the second participant, each entity being provided with a digital certificate and an associated private key, the method comprising:

10 the first customer completing a buyer's portion of a payment instruction, the payment instruction specifying a payment date;

the first customer signing the payment instruction with its private key;

the first customer transmitting the payment instruction to the second customer;

the second customer completing a seller's portion of the payment instruction;

the second customer signing the payment instruction with its private key;

15 the second customer transmitting the payment instruction to the second participant;

the second participant completing a second participant portion of the payment instruction;

the second participant signing the payment instruction with its private key;

the second participant transmitting the payment instruction to the first participant;

20 the first participant executing the payment instruction on the payment date.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the payment instruction is a payment order instruction.

25 3. The method of claim 1, wherein the payment instruction is a payment obligation instruction.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein the payment instruction is a conditional payment order instruction.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein the payment instruction is a conditional payment obligation instruction.

6. The method of claim 1, wherein the payment instruction is a certified payment obligation instruction.

7. The method of claim 1, wherein the payment instruction is a certified conditional payment obligation instruction.

8. The method of claim 1 wherein the first customer executes a contract with the first participant defining roles and responsibilities in connection with payment services.

9. The method of claim 1 wherein the second customer executes a contract with the second participant defining roles and responsibilities in connection with payment services.

10. A method of providing payment services, the method comprising:  
providing a buyer with a plurality of payment instruments, each payment instrument having associated therewith a payment instruction;  
the buyer choosing one of the payment instruments;  
the buyer completing at least a first portion of the payment instruction message associated with the payment instrument chosen by the buyer, the payment instruction message specifying a payment date;  
the first customer signing the payment instruction message with a private key corresponding to a digital certificate of the buyer;  
the signed payment instrument being received by a bank;  
the bank executing the payment instruction on the payment date.

11. The method of claim 10, wherein the selected payment instrument is a payment order.

12. The method of claim 10, wherein the selected payment instrument is a payment obligation.

13. The method of claim 10, wherein the selected payment instrument is a conditional payment order.

14. The method of claim 10, wherein the selected payment instrument is a conditional payment obligation.

15. The method of claim 10, wherein the selected payment instrument is a certified payment obligation.

16. The method of claim 10, wherein the selected payment instrument is a certified conditional payment obligation.

17. The method of claim 10, wherein the payment instrument is negotiable.

18. A method of providing payment services in a buyer to participant model, the model comprising a plurality of entities including a participant and a customer, the customer being a customer of the participant, each entity being provided with a digital certificate and an associated private key, the method comprising:

the first customer completing a buyer's portion of a payment instruction, the payment instruction specifying a payment date;

the first customer signing the payment instruction with its private key;

the first customer transmitting the payment instruction to the participant

the participant completing a participant portion of the payment instruction;

the participant signing the payment instruction with its private key;

the participant executing the payment instruction on the payment date.

19. A method of providing payment services in a direct debit model, the direct-debit model comprising a plurality of entities including a participant, a first customer, and a

second customer, the second customer being a customer of the participant, each entity being provided with a digital certificate and an associated private key, the method comprising:

the first customer completing a buyer's portion of a payment instruction, the payment instruction specifying a payment date;

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the first customer signing the payment instruction with its private key;

the first customer transmitting the payment instruction to the second customer;

the second customer completing a seller's portion of the payment instruction;

the second customer signing the payment instruction with its private key;

the second customer transmitting the payment instruction to the participant;

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the participant completing a participant portion of the payment instruction;

the participant signing the payment instruction with its private key;

the participant executing the payment instruction on the payment date.

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